

2017-07-20

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/9899>

10.1080/00071005.2017.1346229

British Journal of Educational Studies

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HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT IN CONTEMPORARY SCHOOLING

CONTEXTS: AN IRONY IN MOTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores 'home-school' transport in contemporary schooling contexts in England. Home-school transport is a complex issue lying between government departments, policy frameworks, research and professional disciplines. It is complicated further by commercial and private interests alongside social and public ones. Informed by an interdisciplinary literature the authors argue there is an urgent need to develop understanding of the position of home-school transport policy and practices in contemporary schooling contexts, particularly in relation to school choice making and enactment. This paper calls for research to inform the development of home-school transport policy and practices that are socially just and sustainable.

Key words: home-school transport, choice, access, social justice

1. INTRODUCTION

Provision of free home to school (hereafter home-school) transport by Local Authorities (LAs) in England was introduced in the Education Act of 1944, a landmark piece of social and welfare legislation that established a nationwide system of free, compulsory schooling from the ages of five to 15. Free transport to school was one of the mechanisms by which a commitment to enable access to school for all children could be realised. Whilst carrying out a literature review for a study on the problems facing home-to school transport in contemporary schooling contexts, we became aware that within the relative paucity of published work on this subject in education, there was one particular area of silence: the key relationships between home-school transport, school choice, markets and competition. We suspect that here, in these silences, increasingly divisive forces may be operating (Thornthwaite, 2016) which are leading to unreported social injustices.

Transport is not simply a means to an end in terms of access to education; its existence (or lack thereof) has a direct impact at the simplest level on the opportunity to attend school. The journey from home to school is a significant part of the school day for pupils. The physical and social nature of the journey and the transport options available have an influence on children and their experience of school and this is well researched (see for example Ross, 2007; Walker *et al.*, 2009).

This paper reports the findings of a literature review that aimed to develop understanding of how the government funded home-school transport system in England is working in contemporary schooling contexts. We found evidence that the state funded home-school transport is under considerable strain in England as it is in other countries with market oriented schooling systems, by which we mean systems associated with school choice and school diversity, which encourage schools to compete with one another for pupils (West and Ylonen, 2011). For examples of where strained home-school transport systems are being

researched in other countries see; in the US, Wilson *et al.*, (2007); Marshall *et al.*, (2010); Sweden see Andersson *et al.*, (2012); Australia see Morgan & Blackmore, (2013).

This paper also reports our critical examination of the assumption that home-school transport legislation and policy in England has evolved to cover the transport needs of pupils' access to education in contemporary market oriented schooling contexts. In particular, it considers the role government funded home-school transport in England plays in equitable access to school and enactment of school choice.

2. HOME-SCHOOL TRANSPORT IN ENGLAND – AN INTRODUCTION

The term 'school transport' generally refers to transport for children from home to their school (ECMT, 1982). In this paper we are using the Department for Education's (DfE) term 'home-school transport' to avoid confusion with other kinds of school transport that might be used, for example to take children on school organised trips. The content of this section refers to transport for pupils in primary and secondary education up to the age of 16. Legislation relating to transport for students over 16 is different.

In England, the responsibilities of upper tier local authorities (LAs) for the provision of school transport are enshrined in legislation. This means that LAs have to make a level of free transport available, as set out by government. Each LA is responsible for producing a school travel policy based on this legislation, on statutory guidance and existing case law.

There are two main principles for the government that underpin school transport legislation. The first is ensuring that every child can access suitable educational opportunities in a safe manner, and the second is trying to make travel to school more sustainable, environmentally and economically. A pupil's entitlement to home-school transport is determined by the walking distance between where they live and where they attend school,

using the shortest route along which a child could walk to school with reasonable safety. The distance can include use of public footpaths and bridleways as well as footways if they are deemed safe (see DfE, 2014 for more detail). The distances that were first set in the 1944 Education Act were two miles each way for children of eight or under, and three miles each way for children over eight. These distances still stand today although concerns are often raised about the length and suitability of these since some commentators perceive them to be too long (House of Commons Transport Committee, 2009) and they are regularly contested by individual families and groups of parents in school transport provision decisions made by LAs (see Child Law Advice, 2017 for some examples)

School transport legislation is set out in the 1996 Education Act (sections 508A–D), which specifies the responsibilities of LAs. The paragraphs below elucidate the main provisions of the Act of particular interest here.

- Section 508A of the Act places a duty on local authorities in England to assess the school travel needs of all children and persons of sixth form age in their area and to assess and promote the use of sustainable modes of travel. Local authorities must publish a Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy on their website by 31st August each year.
- Section 508B of the Act sets out the general duties placed on local authorities to make such school travel arrangements as they consider necessary for eligible children² within their area, to facilitate their attendance at the relevant educational establishment. Such arrangements must be provided free of charge.
- Section 508C of the Act provides local authorities with discretionary powers to make school travel arrangements for other children not covered by section 508B but the transport does not have to be free.

- Section 508D of the Act places a duty on the Secretary of State to issue guidance to which local authorities have to have regard to in performance of their functions under section 508B (travel arrangements for ‘eligible children’) and 508C (travel arrangements for other children). (DfE, 2014).

The guidance to LAs pertaining to this legislation was reviewed in 2014 (but no changes were made). The legislation is complex and presents difficulties in its interpretation and enactment; for example by parents trying to identify their child’s eligibility for free school transport.

There has been limited change in the policy and practice of home-school transport over the years even though there have been calls for change for many years (see for example Rigby, 1979). In an attempt to promote innovation, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) made a call in 2003 for pilot projects to address both economic and environmental sustainability agendas but none were realised. Attempts at innovation in England have not taken off, perhaps as a result of limited funding and the political sensitivity associated with home-school transport provision (DfES, 2003; Hansard, 2012, House of Commons Transport Committee, 2009).

One reason for the limited progress of the development of home-school transport in England, we argue, is that responsibility for the policy and the necessary funding lies within and between three government departments (Department for Education, Department for Transport, and Department for Communities and Local Government). The commute from home to school also ‘exists at the intersection of a range of contemporary public policy debates, including those related to public health; urban transportation; choice within education markets and other public services’ (Ferrari and Green, 2013, p. 2771). Home-school transport is a complex issue and its position *between* government departments, policy frameworks, research and professional disciplines is complicated further by commercial and private interests in home-school transport provision, in addition to the social and public ones.

Children's journeys to schools lie *between* home and school and are perhaps considered a peripheral part of the school day for school staff. The legal responsibility for safety of pupils begins when they arrive at school (Education Act 2002, section 175), so perhaps understandably the journey a pupil makes before they get to school is seen as a liminal part of the day by school staff. Parents are responsible for getting their children to school but once home-school transport is involved, the legal responsibilities for children on their home-school journey are more complex (see The Key, 2017 for a detailed discussion). Perhaps the complexity and being *between* explains the paucity of research in home-school transport in education. Where are we to begin?

3. HOME-SCHOOL TRANSPORT IN THE CONTEMPORARY SCHOOL CONTEXT IN ENGLAND

The home-school transport responsibility in England, held by the Department for Transport and Department for Education, is devolved to LAs using funding administered by central government, via the Department for Communities and Local Government. LAs organise transport through the contracting of private transport services, provision of public transport passes, or assistance with financing transport for pupils. The system co-ordinated and run by LAs remains based on the idea of LA boundaries and 'school catchment areas'. This is set, ironically, within a context where LAs have a diminishing role in the funding and management of education and schools and there has been a general dismantling of the traditional idea of school catchments (Butler and Hamnett, 2011; DfE, 2011; Hamnett and Butler, 2013; Noden *et al.*, 2014). The increasingly diverse school landscape is changing patterns of home-school commuting (Hine, 2009; Murphy, 2007; Shaw *et al.*, 2013)

Market oriented schooling systems, such as those in England, assume pupils and their families have the necessary capital to make educational choices (Morgan and Blackmore, 2013). The process and enactment of school choice is known to be complex and clearly constrained

by many factors (Burgess *et al.*, 2006) including economic, social and cultural capitals. Offering choice without the necessary resources (such as transport) to make and enact these choices, perpetuates socio-spatial inequalities (Andre-Bechely, 2007). Enactment of an individual's choice of school is determined by locality and the necessary resources and capital including money, mobility and time. Children with access to transport (public or private) are said to have greater mobility capital or 'motility' (Kauffman *et al.*, 2004). To be able to choose to travel to a school that results in a daily commute beyond walking or cycling distance, not covered by LA transport provision, pupils and their families obviously need access to resources for the journey (or a house move). Pupils who do not have access to such resources have less mobility capital, so are limited to choosing a school they can reach. Mobility capital is lower for pupils with low economic capital, those living in areas away from public transport networks and those dependent on public transport systems. As Parsons and Welsh (2006) point out, in order to be fair, a system based on choice, needs properly resourced and justly functioning public services (including transport). There are well known socio-spatial forces at work here, for example, pupils in urban areas are likely to have more schools in their locality (Burgess *et al.*, 2006) and access to suitable public transport. Pupils in rural areas have fewer schools within reach, are more likely to travel longer distances and are less likely to use public transport to get to school (Burgess and Briggs, 2010). It is well documented that children from poor families do not benefit in school markets and competition (see, for example, Burgess and Briggs, 2010; Allen *et al.*, 2014) and we suspect that access to support for transport to school is becoming an increasingly socially divisive issue (Thornthwaite, 2016).

The rules governing access to free home-school transport are complex and locally variable but generally, if a pupil chooses to go to a school which is not their nearest, they are no longer eligible for free transport unless they are 'eligible children' (see endnote 2 for a full summary of eligibility). The legislation acknowledges that transport may play a role in an individuals'

ability to exercise school choice. In an effort to ensure that children from low income groups are not disadvantaged by being unable, for transport reasons, to choose a school other than the one closest to them, they are included within the definition of ‘eligible children’ for the purposes of the Act. To help facilitate choice, LAs must provide free transport to any child from a low-income family³ aged 11 or over who is a registered student at a qualifying school⁴ that is more than two but not more than six miles from their home and where there are not three or more other qualifying schools closer to their home (Education Act, 1996, Schedule 35B). While this helps families in urban areas exercise their right to choose, it will be less helpful to families in rural areas where there might not be more than one school within six miles of a child’s home, and where availability of public transport is limited (House of Commons Transport Committee, 2009). The current English home-school transport legislation is underpinned by the presumption that pupils attend their nearest school; however evidence emerging from research into the impact of school markets on socio-spatial dynamics (see, for example, Bearman and Singleton, 2014; Easton and Ferrari, 2015; Ferrari and Green, 2013), suggests that this presumption must be now questioned.

There is growing anecdotal evidence that this post-war home-school transport system in England with its role in providing equitable access for all children, is under increasing strain. There is a sense that current home-school transport policy and practices have become outdated and economically unsustainable and recognised by successive governments (DfES, 2003; DfE, 2014). Following a recent survey of LAs in England, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) reported:

During 2015/16 local authorities spent around one billion pounds on transporting children to and from educational settings. This is unsustainable given the current financial climate and the growing numbers of pupils overall. Local authorities also have less and less control over the location of new free schools, and school term time

which adds more pressure to already stretched transport budgets, particularly in rural areas. However, this is not just about finance, modern life has changed significantly from when the current statutory guidance was published and it needs to be reviewed to reflect current challenges and living arrangements. ADCS believes it is now time to review local authority duties in relation to home to school transport and that consideration should be given to devolving this duty to schools themselves as we move towards an increasingly school-led system. (ADCS, 2017)

This changing social context alluded to in the ADCS statement is accompanied by scenes of car queues outside schools reported in local news and the dilemmas and frustrations of the ‘school run’ shared on social networking sites like MumsNet. In some localities, parents determined to uphold the free home-school transport for their children, have formed pressure groups whilst others, in despair have set up their own local transport networks. State funded schools are also setting up their own transport systems, which lie outside LA control or coordination. Individual LA home-school transport policies are undergoing review across the country with cuts to non-statutory home-school transport services so that LAs only provide the statutory minimum but bound by education and transport legislation as well as the wrath of public opinion. Some LAs are considering charging for some services even though this would be ‘political suicide’ (County Councillor with responsibility for Children’s Services, personal communication).

4. SCALE AND SCOPE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review that informs this paper began with a search through bodies of literature associated with all the agencies mentioned in the DfE 2014 review as having an interest or stake in home-school transport. These are transport, planning, health and safety, wellbeing, schools, education, children’s services, financial management and the police. As we

have a particular research interest in issues of social justice, we then focussed our study on the publications pertaining to the relationships between school markets and competition, and school transport.

We focussed our search on secondary education, which encompasses 11–18 year olds in England (though we only focus on 11–16 year olds in this paper as different transport arrangements are made for 16–18 year olds). In secondary education pupils tend to travel further to school so are more likely to use home-school transport and it is more likely a child will go to a school which is not their closest (Harland and Stilwell, 2007; Van Ristell *et al.*, 2013 a&b).

We included published academic research and work done by practitioners and policy makers as well as grey literature, published and unpublished resources from central and local government departments, public and commercial transport organisations, and legislation. We also collected ephemeral information from websites, social media sites, personal communications and conversations.

Our synthesis of the literature is a response to the following questions:

- What and where is research taking place?
- What is known about the ways home-school commutes are changing?
- What is known about home-school transport in market oriented schooling landscapes?

What and where is research taking place?

Research (in the broadest sense) about home-school transport in both the UK and international contexts is happening in a number of disparate places. Research is being done by different professional, private, government and academic groups but what is particularly

noticeable is that there is very limited published research work being done in or with education. In a comprehensive review of research on home-school transport, Teske *et al.* (2009) identified five main areas on which past research has focussed (pp. 949–950):

- Modal choice (modes of transport) for the home-school commute such as barriers to the adoption of more sustainable modes of transport and implications of car use for the school run on congestion and urban pollution
- The way children use the commute to school to engage with, and learn about their environment
- Health benefits of walking and other forms of active transport in the context of the commute to school
- The issues associated with safety on the journey to school – including road safety, stranger danger and exposure to pollutants
- Policy implications of the above concerns regarding home-school commuting

Our own literature review confirms that there continues to be research on home-school transport relating to the five areas above, issues with wider policy consequences, for example environmental perspectives and children's health and well-being. However, issues pertaining to the impact of school transport on policy and practice on children's access to school and school choice, which we argue are social justice issues, have received little attention.

Home-school transport lies at the intersection of many policies and practices; education, school building and location, transport policies as well as children's health and wellbeing, and sustainability (Easton and Ferrari, 2015; Ferrari and Green, 2013). Research on home-school transport is being done by academic researchers in disciplines which include social geography (for example Ross, 2007), built environment and community planning (for example Ferrari and Green, 2013) civil engineering (for example Van Ristell *et al.*, 2013

a&b), socio-spatial studies (for example Bearman and Singleton, 2014), and transport policy and practice (for example Thornthwaite, 2016). Research work has been done in association with LAs looking at home-school transport within their transport, planning and education services. For example, researchers in Leeds have been working with the city council education and planning departments on the changing nature of home-school commutes in the city with a view to informing the planning of school places in the future (Harland and Stillwell, 2007). Dorset County Council (2016), West Yorkshire (Parkin *et al*, 2004) and other LAs in England have long-standing commitments to innovative school transport planning and commissioning. Some, but not all, of this work is published publicly.

Other work is being done by private transport companies (see, for example, the yellow school bus experiments run by the travel company First (DfT, 2003)) and organisations such as the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK (CPT) and Association of Transport Coordinating Officers (ATCO). This is generally not published or available in the public domain.

With regard to government led developments, there were various initiatives associated with the new schools bill including the School Travel Action Plan started by the DfES in 2003 to stimulate innovation by LAs to reduce traffic congestion. The DfE had a brief consultation and review of policy in 2014 and some changes were made to guidance but no significant change to policy or legislation. The House of Commons Transport Select Committee reported on home-school transport in 2003–4 and held a special session in 2011 on young people and transport, in association with the Youth Parliament select committee (Youth Parliament, 2012). Despite this work, little real change on the ground seems to have resulted. Home-school transport systems run by LAs continue to operate much as they have done for the last 20 years, even though the school landscape around them has changed significantly.

What is known about home-school transport in the contemporary market oriented education landscape?

There are very few studies looking directly at transport and school choice in England. As part of wider studies on school choice Flatley *et al.* (2001) found 35% of parents cited travel as a reason for choosing a school and Bagley *et al.* (2001) argue that access to transport and the distance of a school from home were a major influence in school choice in localities they studied.

The role of transport in enacting school choice would, on first examination, seem straightforward; school choice can be accessed and enacted if the child can get to the school. The link between access to transport, poverty, children's mobility and social exclusion is well documented in transport literature and informs transport policy and practice in the UK (see for example Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). As Ferrari and Green (2013) argue, how children travel to school lies within broader concerns on the limits of choice in public services within fragmented social and geographic space (Reay and Lucey, 2003; West, 2006). Thornthwaite (2016) argues that there are now stark geographical inequities in access to choice in education and support for transport to school, with generous provision in urban areas (with free transport for all children across London for example) but an ongoing loss of services in rural areas.

Parsons and Welsh, (2006) in a small locality case study, argue that enactment of school choice does not happen in poor families if they do not get support with transport. Allen *et al.* (2014) similarly argue that 'disadvantaged families (by definition) have access to less in the way of resources which may limit the range of schools which they can consider due to transport costs' (p. 41). Acknowledgement was made in government that poor families in England may need support to enable them to choose and some additional funding towards

school transport has been made available (see DfE, 2014). We found no published research on the use or impact of this Extended Rights funding but there are reports of Extended Rights budget reductions to LAs (see for example Leeds City Council in Scott, 2016). The limitation of school choice by transport is being researched elsewhere, for example in the US by Wilson *et al.* (2007) in Sweden by Andersson *et al.* (2012) and across Europe (see de Boer, E. and van Goeverden, 2008 for examples).

What is known about the ways home-school commuting is changing?

Length of daily home-school commute

It generally seems to be a given that the enacting of school choice will mean that more children will go to a school that is not their nearest and hence travel further to school from home, although there is evidence of some debate here (see for example Shaw *et al.*, 2013; Van Ristell, *et al.*, 2013a). The National Travel Survey for England based on household survey data shows some increase in school journey distances (but not journey times) for both primary and secondary school pupils (DfT, 2014; DfT, 2015). Transport researchers Stead and Davis (1998) and Murphy (2007) agree to some extent, that school choice has led to longer commutes.

Burgess *et al.* (2006) provide a comprehensive study of school choice and access (in distance terms) to schools in England using the National Pupil Database (NPD) and PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census) data. They show that distances travelled in rural areas travel are longer than those in urban areas, that distance travelled is greater in LAs with selective schools and on average, children from less affluent families travel shorter distances to school. They note that some of this effect is due to the greater concentration of such children in urban areas (p. 6). They argue that the two key practical issues in the reform of school choice are transport and access, which are exacerbated for families in rural areas owing to narrower school choice sets available within a suitable distance.

In their case study of the city of Sheffield and from their urban planning perspective, Easton and Ferrari (2015) and Ferrari and Green (2013) suggest that less than half of all children, including primary school children, attend their nearest school and so, by default, have longer commutes. They find children from high house price neighbourhoods are more likely to go to their nearest school so travel shorter distances to school (see comparison with Burgess *et al*, 2006 above)

Researchers undertaking computer modelling to predict the impact of changes to school choice policy back up the idea that a market oriented schooling system is increasing school commuting. For example, Bearman and Singleton's model (2014) shows evidence of significant increases in carbon production due to increased transportation resulting from the enactment of school choice. Parsons *et al.*, (2010) use GIS data to examine the flow of pupils across catchment boundaries in a LA and show over a third of Year Seven (age 11-12) pupils moving to schools other than their 'catchment school', with inner-city catchments being the most 'permeable'. In their study of the impact of school choice in one deprived LA, Parsons and Welsh, (2006) argue that school choice has not resulted in increased mobility of any kind.

Examples of the complexity of the situation regarding changing commuting distances are seen in the examples cited above and also in data from The School Travel Pathfinder Draft Prospectus and Guidance (DfES, 2005). This data indicates that pupils in more urban areas were more likely to attend a school other than their nearest but generally travel shorter distances. The data indicates that pupils in London⁵ and in metropolitan boroughs are likely to live within the statutory walking distance for at least their nearest two schools (where distances are measured in straight lines). Conversely, in unitary and county authorities (which are more likely to have a mix of urban and rural areas), pupils are more likely to attend their

nearest school but they are likely to be further away from their school, regardless of whether it is the nearest or not. So children in more rural areas are likely to have to travel longer distances (and have fewer schools in their locality) which could affect the enactment of school choice.

Larger scale international studies have shown that changes in patterns of school commuting appear to be very complex and variable (Van Ristell *et al*, 2013b) with, for example different levels of change in rural and urban areas, within cities and in areas experiencing school closure and reorganisation programmes. For examples of socio-spatial studies of school choice, home-school commuting and transport in US cities see Marshall *et al* (2010) and Wilson *et al* (2007) and in Sweden see Andersson *et al*, 2012).

Changes in modes of transport

Mode choice for school commutes is important because having an understanding of use and motivations for travelling in a particular way is used in planning transport infrastructure, services, and for influencing travel mode choice for political reasons (for example to encourage more active or sustainable travel). The mode of travel used by pupils for their school commute was recorded in the regular data audits submitted by schools to the NPD in England. Unfortunately, routine collection of this data on travel mode was discontinued in 2011.

Mode choice for the commute to school has been explored in a number of research reports and is generally linked to research on children's health, safety and wellbeing or economic or environmental sustainability. Many of these reports identify time and distance as the key factors influencing mode choice, within a wider frame of urban form and density, weather and the psycho-social impacts of a car-centred society (Teske *et al*, 2009). Mitra (2012) has produced a useful overview of the existing research and identifies household

attitude and parental self-efficacy, socio-economic factors, travel to work, neighbourhood and environmental factors and distance, as having an impact on travel to school (and not just from a mode choice perspective). It is to be noted that there remains a statutory duty under the Education and Inspections Act 2006 to promote *sustainable* travel to and from school.

Some studies have looked at the impact of changes in journey distance on mode choice. It might generally be assumed that as distance to school increases, the likelihood of ‘active’ transport decreases. However, research available in England suggests it is not clear that increasing journey length affects pupils’ activity, independence or wellbeing on their way to school. For example a longitudinal study focussing on children’s independent mobility (Shaw *et al.*, 2013) found more children are now walking to school but that also there has been a significant increase in parents accompanying them, a trend also found in the DfT Travel Survey (2015).

Anecdotal evidence of the increased use of cars for ‘the school run’ in England abounds, with concerns being raised about pupil safety, wellbeing and increased carbon and pollutant emissions (see for example McKinney, 2012; Parkin *et al.*, 2004, Thornthwaite, 2016). Increased car use for school commuting is reported in many academic studies (see for example Hillman, 2006; Pooley *et al.*, 2005) and the DfT Travel Survey but this may just mirror the increased ownership and use of cars *per se*.

What is clear is that there a wide range of personal factors that are having an influence on modal choice for the daily commute to school. The process of mode choice is complex, particular and localised. Added to the increasing diversity of school provision that is outside of LA control, it is now difficult for transport providers to *predict* how individual pupils will travel and *record* what is actually happening.

5. OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

A significant silence in the literature was that of the changing nature of public transport in England and its impact on school choice making and enactment. This was discussed during the Youth Parliament's contribution to the House of Commons debate with the Transport Select Committee on young people and their use of public transport. (Youth Parliament, 2012) and differences in rural and urban experiences were evident. Thornthwaite argues in her national survey (2016), that there is evidence of an increasingly divisive home-school transport offer between rural and urban areas. For example, Transport for London now offer free travel for young people under the age of 15 but areas outside of metropolitan centres continue to witness reductions in public transport services, particularly bus services in rural localities (ACRE, 2014). The reduction in the level of school transport provided by LAs to the statutory minimum may also have an impact on existing public transport services (where cross subsidies are made), again in areas outside metropolitan centres. We found no publications on the impact these changes may be having on school choice making and enactment.

Innovative solutions to entrenched public transport problems abound in transport literature. For example, the proposal for regional Total Transport Authorities (Raikes *et al.*, 2015) promotes the pooling of capacity of public transport services (including school transport) and eventually private services, increasing the flexibility and coherence of diverse services. However, there appears to be no sign of significant change in transport legislation or policy in England or commitment from the private sector to allow such systems to develop.

Evidence collected from unpublished sources in England suggest there are significant but localised changes to home-school transport arrangements taking place and that these are not generally being researched or openly reported. The authors have come across a number of unpublished cases from English localities that would suggest that changes are happening in a piecemeal way. For example, the authors have done a small-scale study (Gristy *et al.*, 2014)

based in a large rural secondary school. Here, the head teacher was keen to understand the distribution and movement of pupils (and potential pupils) in relation to declining public transport routes. Visualisations were made of the spatial distribution of pupils at the school and their modes of travel. These maps helped understanding of the spatial distribution of ‘access’ and ‘barriers to access’ and led to development of bespoke transport arrangements for some villages within travelling distance of the school but which lay beyond the LA funded transport network. The authors are aware of other school leaders who are using commercial Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software to do their own spatial mapping of pupil commutes along with achievement, attendance and so on.

There are local developments in the use of pupil data held by LAs in association with information databases such as the NPD to model and predict pupil-commuting patterns for use by LA home-school transport co-ordinators or by commercial transport strategists, planners and providers (see, for example, Dorset County Council, 2016). Much of this work is commercially sensitive, not published publically and it is evident that sharing this work across and within LA jurisdictions is difficult. With an increasingly fragmented system, with different schooling and transport policies and practices in operation, coordination of home-school transport networks is getting more difficult (see for example the website of ATCO and the report by ADCS, 2016).

An example of the kinds of piecemeal development of home-school transport is seen in another small, unpublished study by the authors. In one suburban locality, a particular state funded academy secondary school had organised its own bus transport system funded by the school and through payments from parents. Evidence collected from the school website, articles in local newspapers, roadside observations, anecdotes and conversations with people in the area revealed the school had commissioned a private company to run a number of buses on routes beyond those organised and funded by the LA. These additional buses appear

to being used to extend ‘the reach’ of the school to increase its potential student body. This new transport network collects pupils from a wide geographical areas and the school has been accused of ‘poaching’ children from other schools in the area through these additional bus routes. These sorts of private transport schemes are familiar in independent, private schools but not in the state funded schooling system. We have found no systematic research on these sorts of developments in England.

With increasing numbers of schools that are autonomous from LAs, we were expecting to find evidence of research by, or with, school leaders on pupil commuting. However, we have not found any significant publications on home-school transport from the perspective of education leaders, managers or governors. It might be argued that the daily journey to school for pupils lies outside of a school’s core pedagogic activity, so is of limited interest to school leaders.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The journey from home is a universal school experience, central to the lives of pupils and their families yet lies in the shadows of schooling, beyond the spotlight focussed on what happens inside the school. Home-school transport involves policy and practices existing outside of schools and between schools, communities and families. Home-school transport policy and practices have implications for socially just and sustainable futures. We argue that they lie in the problematic spaces between government departments of education, community and transport and within fragmented schooling systems.

Where research is being done, there is growing evidence that in England, more children are not attending their nearest school and that those pupils are more likely to live in an urban area than a rural one. There is some evidence to suggest that school markets and competition are leading to longer commutes to school. There appear to be localised changes

and innovations in public and private home-school transport but little evidence of research of these. There is little published evidence regarding the impact of the availability of transport (state or privately funded, public or otherwise) on school selection and on the resulting socio-spatial patterns in both schools and communities.

We argue that in order to inform the development of education and transport practices that are socially just and sustainable there is an urgent need to develop an understanding of the role of home-school transport in the contemporary education landscape of markets and competition. Our research raises a number of key questions for interdisciplinary groups, including education researchers who will need to work together to identify solutions that lead to fairer and sustainable school transport practices. Firstly, sense needs to be made of how pupils choose their schools and move between them and their homes, across localities fragmented by current education policies and practices and what role access to transport plays in this. This is a challenge in competitive environments with potentially commercially sensitive data. Secondly, developing understanding is required of how the reconfiguring and intensification of market work by schools through transportation provision (Morgan and Blackmore, 2013) is changing choice and commuting patterns in different localities and groups. There is further, a need for socio-spatial analyses of the impact of reduced education and public transport budgets and provision on access to and enactment of school choice. The state funded home-school transport provision designed in 1944 to give equitable access to education for all is in trouble. Research is needed urgently to inform the development of this provision, so that it can become socially just, sustainable and fit for purpose in the contemporary schooling context in England.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors wish it to be known that each contributed equally to the writing of the paper.

8. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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² An 'eligible child' is defined in Schedule 35B of the Education Act 1996, and includes: children who are unable to walk by reason of their special educational needs, disability or mobility problem (including temporary medical conditions); children unable to walk in safety to school because of the nature of the route; disabled parents (if walking safely to school requires being accompanied by a parent); and children living beyond the statutory walking distance of three miles because there is not a suitable school available closer, or children from low income families who attend a qualifying school between two miles and six miles from home (as long as there are not three or more nearer suitable qualifying schools); or the child is from a low income family and attending their nearest school preferred on the grounds of religion or belief, between two and 15 miles from home.

³ A low-income family is defined as one where the child is in receipt of free school meals, or the family is in receipt of the maximum level of working tax credits.

⁴ Qualifying schools are defined within the Act as being suitable for the age, ability and aptitude of the child and any special educational needs (SEN) they may have, and must have places available. They can include community, foundation or voluntary schools, community or foundation special schools, non-maintained special schools, pupil referral units, maintained nursery schools, city technology colleges, city colleges for technology, and academies.

⁵ Travel in London for 11–15 year olds is free on buses and trams.